

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 288

EC 111 773

AUTHOR Callahan, William P.
TITLE International Perspectives in Curriculum Development
in Special Education. Great Britain-USA.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future
Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25
- July 1, 1978)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Comparative Education; Elementary Secondary
Education; *Foreign Countries; *Handicapped Children;
International Educational Exchange; *Special
Education
IDENTIFIERS Great Britain

ABSTRACT

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127 #2

AUG 3 1978

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International Perspectives in Curriculum

Development in Special Education

Great Britain-USA

Dr. William P. Callahan, Project Coordinator

Biological Sciences Curriculum Study

P. O. Box 930

Boulder, Colorado 80306

Phone: 303-666-6558



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Abstract

This paper presents similarities in process, goals, procedures, and evaluation of curriculum development for special education in the United States of America and Great Britain. It also points out the need for international exchange of information and materials in special education.

International Perspectives in Curriculum

Development in Special Education

Great Britain-USA

Process

Special education means education by special methods appropriate to the requirements of pupils whose physical, intellectual, emotional, or social development cannot, in the opinion of the education authority, be adequately promoted by ordinary methods. [Education, Scotland Act, 1969]

As this statement implies, the very foundation of special education rests upon the means used to promote it. The curriculum, that is, the organized set of activities designed to accomplish specified goals, represents those means. The curriculum includes not only materials but also methods--those methods referred to as "special" in the quotation above. The recognition of such basic premises reflects a common understanding internationally of the curriculum development process inherent in special education.

Although the processes used for curriculum development will differ for children of different ages and different learning characteristics, they will of necessity reflect certain similar purposes, namely:

1. To determine what experiences will best contribute to the child's development.
2. To organize those experiences for peak effectiveness.
3. To select instructional strategies best suited to the child's responsiveness and participation.

In carrying out such a set of purposes, certain general procedures are followed:

1. Drawing up a statement of behavioral objectives.
2. Defining desired outcomes of skills and subskills.
3. Sequencing of steps.
4. Field-testing in a formative sense.
5. Preparing a summative evaluation.

It is important to keep in mind that the steps outlined above are basic, no matter where the curriculum development takes place.

The similarity of curriculum development in special education internationally was brought out at a recent interdisciplinary meeting on research for the mentally handicapped held at Ravenswood, England; the meeting was sponsored by the Association of Professions for the Mentally Handicapped. At that meeting, Professor Peter Mittler stated, "Our task on the one hand is to find a balance between general aims which inform what we do and give us a rationale of why we do it and on the other hand the setting of quite specific behavioral objectives." (Mittler 1977) In Special Education in Scotland, Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne state:

The curriculum in special schools, as in all other schools, is the means of striving towards the desired end. Therefore, before a suitable curriculum can be devised a set of aims must be agreed upon. If the aims of education are defined as passing a certain examination, or gaining a defined degree of proficiency in a certain subject, then the desired curriculum may be fairly self-evident. At least the different alternatives can be tested in an uncomplicated pretest/posttest fashion. It would, however, be a mistake to restrict the aims of education to those areas in which progress can be easily measured. This would be putting the cart before the horse or the exam before the curriculum. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

Goals

UNESCO has taken the position that the basic aim of special education is to prevent a disability from becoming a handicap (UNESCO 1973). That position is shared in common at the international level of special education. Anything less than an attempt to prevent disability from becoming handicap would be to

the detriment of the population of students we attempt to serve. More specifically, the aims and goals of special education, although worded differently, are also mutually shared at the international level.

Fundamentally, the aims of special education must be the same as the aims of ordinary education, the fullest development of the potential skills of the pupil in order that he may take his rightful place in society. The pupils in special schools may not, in some areas, have equal potential with their contemporaries in ordinary schools, but they do have the right to full development of whatever potential they do have. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

That statement of aim can be compared to one expressed by Professor Peter Mittler in his paper, "Putting Research to Work":

What teachers say: We want our children to develop to the maximum of their potential. We want our children to learn to adjust to the demands of society. We want our children to be happy. Now there is nothing wrong with these aims. . . . if somebody walks into a classroom and says to a teacher: What are you doing? What are your aims with this child? She doesn't say, "I'm aiming to develop his language." Because that doesn't mean anything as an objective. But if she says her objective is to do something where she can actually demonstrate after ten minutes or an hour or even 24 hours that that aim can be achieved, then that is a demonstration of the differences between an aim and an objective. [Mittler 1977]

Those statements can then be compared to an orientation to curriculum development that has been described by Herbert Goldstein of New York University as the ability to think critically and to act independently. He has defined those terms as follows:

The ability to think critically implies that one is able to make judgments, decisions, comparisons, and commitments in a way that will cause the least possible conflict with one's environment, while providing satisfaction for the individual. To accomplish these goals one needs a fund of knowledge, facts and concepts and the ability to see the relationship between these and the immediate issue. Critical thinking is, within the traditional view of education, a concern of curriculum in a sense that children acquire many facts and concepts in the ordinary course of their classroom experiences. These added to facts and concepts learned elsewhere are connected, reinforced and enriched. The curriculum, then, represents educators' selection and ordering of knowledge, facts and concepts which together represent the relationship between what role the school sees itself playing in the maturation of its students and the world into which they are growing and will emerge at maturity.

The ability to act independently can be regarded as a personality factor. That is, it represents the type of self-concept that permits the child (and adult) to pit himself against a critical, ever-evaluating world and to accept decisions about his performance with sufficient equanimity to do it again and again. [Goldstein 1969]

Goldstein arrived at this overall goal through research related to socio-occupational competence. That research indicated the primary failure of retarded individuals in the socio-occupational arena as adults is not necessarily related to factual information but to an inability to deal with the individuals around them in an effective and positive fashion.

Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne state:

Research into the subject of subsequent employment of special school pupils has highlighted the fact that one of the main factors contributing to failure in employment is not illiteracy, nor even lack of intelligence per se, but failure to get on with fellow workers, emotional outbursts, and general lack of social skills. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

Brennan summarizes some relevant research and goes on to conclude:

The qualities which need to be fostered are those of self-esteem and self-reliance, courtesy, ability to listen, to follow instructions, willingness to recognize the need for help and to seek it properly, friendliness in approach to others and interest in appropriate leisure activities. School experiences which foster these positive social qualities will contribute more to vocational success than will narrow, specific vocational training. [Brennan 1974]

That concept is further supported by Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne:

The desired curriculum is based on the objectives of literacy plus vocational training. It must attempt to encourage the pupils to converse in as coherent a fashion as is possible for them. They must be given the chance to observe and understand the effect their behavior can have on others, and how this can react to their own disadvantage. They must be made aware of the various agencies which can provide assistance for them after they leave school and be helped to develop the confidence needed to obtain such assistance. These are some of the objectives contained within the aim of special education. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

As can be seen, a parallel exists in the goals and the research related to the establishment of those goals in special education in the United States

and in Great Britain.

Procedures

The following two statements illustrate similarity in international perspective on the necessary prerequisites for curriculum development:

I believe that fruitful development in the field of curriculum development and teaching depends upon evolving styles of co-operative research by teachers and using full-time researchers to support the teachers' work. [Stenhouse 1975]

Let us be honest with ourselves. Our courses of study have tended to be watered-down regular curriculum. If we are removed from the clinical stage to a science of instruction, we will need a rich array of validated prescriptive programs of instruction at our disposal. To assemble these programs will take time, talent, and money; teams of specialists including creative teachers, curriculum specialists, programmers, and theoreticians will be needed to do the job. [Dunn 1968]

Responses to such statements in the United States and in other countries have varied. In the United States, there has been a reasonable thrust at the national level to develop exemplary projects in curriculum development for adoption and adaptation by local school districts. Projects such as I Can, Project Math, Me Now, Me and My Environment, Me In the Future, Project More, and The Social Learning Curriculum all represent large-scale curriculum development projects. The curriculum development process used in these projects has been described in Planning Curriculum Development: With Examples from Projects for the Mentally Retarded (Mayer, ed. 1975). This document describes one well-established American process of curriculum development, from the initial stages through the final summative evaluations. The process includes

teacher input as well as developer-researcher input and combines them with the talents of content experts to produce a well-integrated procedure.

The situation in Scotland has been summarized by Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne as follows:

In Scotland, teachers are subject to very few external directives in the classroom situation. External examinations are probably the nearest things to aims or objectives which are imposed from above on Scottish teachers. In special schools there are no external examinations. Teachers in this situation are expected to set their own aims and objectives. Who then can set criteria by which to judge innovation? Only the teachers. It is therefore important that teachers be involved in every stage of the curriculum development process. Curriculum development projects have sometimes consulted teachers in the early stages, taken their opinions during evaluation, and sought their cooperation during innovation. But essentially the design of curriculum development projects and the "objective" evaluation of them has remained in the hands of researchers. After such evaluation the researchers are faced with the task of convincing the teachers that they approved the worth of whatever development they are proposing. Such a strategy both within and without the special school context has not proved particularly effective in the past decade. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

Evaluation

Evaluation practices in Scotland have been summed up by Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne in this statement:

Evaluation of educational research is probably associated in the minds of most teachers with phrases such as, "pre-test/post-test," "gains," and "control groups." Under this agricultural/botanical

type of evaluation an innovation is tried out on a group of pupils and gains in terms of prespecified precise behavioral objectives are measured and compared with those of a control group using other methods. Teacher performance and pupil/teacher interaction are usually taken to be constant, as is teacher enthusiasm for both methods. If the results from the new method compare favorably with alternative methods then the innovation is declared a success and passed into the classrooms bearing the seal of the "experts" approval but in the classroom the teacher may well be unimpressed with the experts' opinion, and such "proven" innovations might thus fail to be implemented, and never be institutionalized. The result of such "expert" evaluation cuts more ice with other researchers than it does with teachers, and the greatest innovation in the world is useless if teachers do not wish to adopt it.

From this can be concluded that the type of evaluation most suitable to an innovation might depend on the nature of the client. In the business of educational innovation the person who must be convinced of the value of the product or method is, without doubt, the classroom teacher. The method of evaluation used must therefore be the one most likely to test the innovation in terms which make sense to the classroom teacher. [Dockrell, Dunn, and Milne 1978]

The formative evaluation process is used extensively in the United States.

This process is described in a publication of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS), developers of Me Now, Me and My Environment, and Me in the Future.

A goal of most curriculum projects, including those of the BSCS, is to produce materials that are not only innovative but also better than those already in existence--and to make these materials available for use as quickly as possible. To this end, the goal of

our evaluation in the BSCS is to gather information from teachers, students, and consulting experts that will aid in an immediate revision of materials as they are developed. This function of improvement and quality control is called formative evaluation.

It is also considered useful however to include summative evaluation. The combination of these two types of evaluation--summative and formative--allow an ongoing evaluation of the project during its development and a study of the effectiveness of the curriculum following its development. [BSCS 1973]

Although the examples of evaluation procedures given here are brief, they do illustrate a similar perspective in the evaluation of developed materials.

Summary

A significant similarity exists between the curriculum development processes and problems in the United States and those in Great Britain. There are similarities in process, goals, procedures, and evaluation; but despite such a high degree of similarity, there has been relatively little exchange of information at the international level. That should begin to change as information related to the National Instructional Center for Special Education Materials, the Council for Exceptional Children's Professional Information Center, and additional information related to international bibliographies becomes more available worldwide. Until such time, everything possible must be done to expedite an international exchange of information related to the special education curriculum.

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